

Somebody's Perfect!
1 John 4:7-21

Of all of the sermons John Wesley wrote and preached in his lifetime, perhaps none was as controversial as the one he entitled "Christian Perfection". He based it upon the Apostle Paul's words to the Philippians 3:12 **-Not that I have already attained, or am already perfected; but I press on, that I may lay hold of that for which Christ Jesus has also laid hold of me.**

John Wesley believed the Scriptures taught that it was possible and indeed should be the goal of every Christian to achieve perfection in his or her lifetime. He certainly recognized how that teaching could cause considerable controversy. Listen to his opening paragraph:

There is scarce any expression in Holy Writ which has given more offence than this. The word *perfect* is what many cannot bear. The very sound of it is an abomination to them. And whosoever *preaches perfection* (as the phrase is,) that is, asserts that it is attainable in this life, runs great hazard of being accounted by them worse than a heathen man or a publican.

In fact, at one time that was a great stumbling block for me as I struggled with God's call to ministry. I had always believed and understood that nobody was perfect, yet I found myself in a denomination that seemingly was at odds with that established and accepted truth. We all know that God alone is perfect, and we certainly can't make ourselves equal to God. To make matters worse, when I would ask other Methodists to explain this doctrine to me, I found myself even more confused. Every person I asked seemed to have a different explanation or understanding of it. The only thing consistent was the advice to read Wesley's sermon for myself.

So I did. And I was still confused. So I read it again and again. And then I stumbled upon this sentence: Christian perfection, therefore, does not imply (as some men seem to have imagined) an exemption either from ignorance or mistake, or infirmities or temptations. Indeed, it is only another term for holiness. They are two names for the same thing. Thus every one that is perfect is holy, and every one that is holy is, in the Scripture sense, perfect. Yet we may, lastly observe that neither in this respect is there any absolute perfection on earth.

There was a glimmer of hope in those words, because before Wesley defined what a perfect Christian was, he first defined what a perfect Christian wasn't. Perfect Christians are not free from ignorance. Even a perfect Christian will find it impossible to know all there is to know about God. Even a perfect Christian may be mistaken when they interpret and apply Scripture to their lives. And because of the fall, even a perfect Christian may have physical infirmities and a less than perfect ability to reason and make decisions. We will make mistakes because of those flaws. And yes, even perfect Christians will still face temptation from time to time as they live their lives.

So, what exactly does it mean in the Wesleyan sense of the word to be made perfect? More precisely, what does it mean to be holy? A good working definition is **“Christian perfection is our becoming everything that God created us to be”**. As Wesleyan scholar Albert Outler put it “it is a process where we recover our negative power not to sin and our positive power to love God supremely”.

Here is a real life example that illustrates that process. One of the miracles of modern medicine is a doctor's ability to transplant organs and other body parts. The first person in history to undergo a successful face transplant was a beautiful woman who was shot in the face by her husband. After the attack she managed to survive, although she was horribly disfigured. Children would run in horror when they saw her in public. Doctors at the Cleveland Clinic did surgery and she received a new face. Her natural beauty has not been completely restored, but she is much closer to where she was before the attack. Doctors will continue to do more surgery, and perhaps some day people might not even know she had surgery. At her news conference, she told how grateful she was for the doctors that gave her a new chance to live her life. She couldn't thank them enough.

That woman, like the rest of humanity created in God's image, was once beautiful. But through the effects of sin God's beauty was no longer apparent in her. Instead of seeing the beauty of God, the ugly face of evil was all that was visible when people saw her face. You might imagine the anger and ill feelings that she harbored toward her attacker and for those who stared at her. Doctors were moved with compassion and love and performed a miracle to restore her appearance even though they knew she would not have the means to pay for it.

As a result, her feelings of despair, anger and hatred were quickly replaced by thanksgiving and gratitude for those doctors who saved her life. She received a second chance, the cost of which she could never even begin to repay.

I suggest to you the process is the same when we receive our new life in Jesus Christ. The Scripture lesson this morning is all about God's love for His children, and the effect it has on them. Like the doctors who had love and compassion for the woman whose outer body was disfigured by sin, **God has compassion and love for humanity whose inner body, their souls, are disfigured by sin.**

God loves His creation so much that gives every person an opportunity to start over, to be reborn, to rid themselves of the ugly scars of sin and replace them with the beauty of Christ. He loves us even though we may not even be aware of it at first, just as the woman who received a new face had no idea ahead of time that these doctors were meeting and planning to do it for her.

Once we acknowledge His love and accept it by grace, our lives will never be the same. At that point we are more than just an old person with a new face; we are a brand new creation in Christ. And from that moment the Holy Spirit empowers us to demonstrate that love towards others that we meet, friend and enemy alike. Christian perfection is a process, **the process of becoming everything God created us to be through love.** God loves us, we respond to His love through the love of Jesus Christ, He empowers us by the Holy Spirit, we love Him more and more and as a result we sin less and less. Because of His love we then love others and become more and more like Him until some day we find our ourselves....perfect. Until then shall we continue to pray for His help? Amen.